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ABSTRACT

The study investigated whether learning disabled fifth, sixth, and seventh graders who were given an easy opportunity to look good would be as likely to take the opportunity as other children. Ss were given the Children's Social Desirability Scale, a questionnaire which lists a series of statements which indicate exaggerated claims of socially desirable behaviors and occasional lapses in socially desirable behavior. Children's scores indicated the extent to which they try to present themselves as perfect, i.e., the extent to which they claim that they always behave in a socially desirable way and deny that there are any lapses. A second measure was given to assess Ss' self esteem. Results from the Social Desirability Scale indicated that the learning disabled children were as desirous of "looking good" as nondisabled children. Findings suggested that when learning disabled children are found to behave differently in social situations than other children, it is unlikely that these differences arise because of lack of motivation on the part of the children to behave in a socially approved way. The lack of differences between learning disabled and nondisabled children on the self esteem scale replicated the findings of previous research. (SW)

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LEARNING DISABLED CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM AND DESIRE FOR APPROVAL

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The study that I'm going to describe examined two aspects of learning disabled children's feelings about themselves. The first was their desire to look good to others; the second was their feelings about their own self-worth, in other words, their self-esteem.

We looked at the question of whether learning disabled children wanted to look good to others because there is considerable evidence that learning disabled children are not, in fact, well thought of by others. For example, a number of studies have found that learning disabled children are not particularly well liked by classmates (Bryan, 1974, 1976; Bruininks, 1980, a, b; Hutton & Polo, 1976). In addition, nondisabled classmates who worked with learning disabled children on an academic task assumed that the learning disabled child's success on the task was due more to luck than was their own success (Bryan, Cosden, Pearl & Ellis, in preparation). So peers seem to devalue both the learning disabled child's social and academic performances.

Parents also are well aware of learning disabled children's shortcomings. In interview studies they describe their learning disabled child as lacking in a number of social behaviors (Owen, Adams, Forrest, Stolz & Fisher, 1971; Strag, 1972) and as possessing fewer strengths and more weaknesses than parents ascribe to nondisabled children (Bryan, Pearl, Zimmerman & Matthews, in press).

In addition, mothers of learning disabled children attributed their child's successes more to luck and less to ability, while attributing their child's failures less to bad luck and more to a lack of ability than did mothers of nondisabled children (Pearl & Bryan, 1982). Indeed, studies even have found that adults unacquainted with children in videotapes, rate the learning disabled children in the videotapes lower than the nondisabled children after only a very brief viewing (Bryan & Perlmutter, 1979; Bryan & Sherman, 1980).

Given the combined force of all of these negative opinions, it might be adaptive for learning disabled children simply not to care what others think of them. Yet we suspected that this was not the case. For example, in a study in which learning disabled children had to decide with two classmates on a present for their classroom, they participated in the discussion as much as the other children, but did so unassertively: compared to nondisabled children, they argued less for their choices, and agreed more and disagreed less with the choices of other children in their group (Bryan, Donahue & Pearl, 1981). These unassuming behaviors seem likely to have been an attempt to ingratiate themselves to the other children. In another study, learning disabled children were more likely than nondisabled to report that they would go along with behaviors of friends that they thought were wrong (Bryan, Werner, & Pearl, in press). Again, it looked like the learning disabled children were particularly desirous of the acceptance of others.

In the present study, we asked whether learning disabled children who were given an easy opportunity to look good would be as likely to take the opportunity as other children. We did this by giving the children a questionnaire called the Children's Social Desirability Scale (Crandall, Crandall & Katkovsky,

1965). This questionnaire lists a series of statements, and the children have to indicate whether each is true or false for them. Some of the statements are exaggerated claims of socially desirable behaviors, for example:

- "I never act 'fresh' or 'talk back' to my mother or father" and
- "I am always careful about keeping my clothing neat, and my room picked up."

Other statements indicate some at least occassional lapses in social desirable behavior, for example:

- "I sometimes feel angry when I don't get my way." and
- "Sometimes I want to do things my parents think I am too young to do."

The children's score indicates the extent to which they try to present themselves as perfect, that is, the extent to which they claim that they always behave in a socially desirable way and deny that there are any lapses. In other words, we gave these children a very simple opportunity to look good to the experimenter, whom the children knew was not familiar with their actual behavior.

The second measure we gave the children was a measure of self-esteem. The question of whether learning disabled children have more negative attitudes toward themselves has been of concern for some time, and there have been quite a few studies that have looked at learning disabled children's self-concept. Many of these studies have, in fact, found learning disabled children to have lower self-concepts than nondisabled children. However, an examination of the scales used in these studies suggests that such findings were virtually inevitable (Nicholls, Licht & Pearl, 1982). For example, one scale that has been

frequently used is the Coopersmith self-esteem inventory. Included in the inventory are items that learning disabled children would almost necessarily answer in a way that would indicate low self-esteem. For example, some of the items are:

- "I'm not doing as well in school as I'd like to."
- "I'm proud of my school work." and
- "I often get discouraged in school."

With learning disabled children's academic problems being what they are, it would be extremely surprising if the children answered these questions in a way other than that which would indicate low self-esteem. Other items relate to relationships with other children, and again, if the children are at all aware of their social difficulties, they could only answer the items in one way. For example, two of the items are:

- "I'm popular with kids my own age." and
- "Kids usually follow my ideas."

If the children answered these items honestly, the typical learning disabled child would have to answer them in a way that would indicate low self-esteem. So while these items may pick up learning disabled children's perceptions of poor performance, they don't really address the issue of self-esteem, defined by Coopersmith as "a personal judgment of worthiness" (Coopersmith, 1967, page 5).

Another scale that has been used in studies with learning disabled children, the Piers-Harris self-concept scale, is similarly ambiguous in terms of its implications for understanding learning disabled children's self-esteem. It includes items like:

- "I am slow in finishing my school work."
- "I am unpopular." and even
- "I am a good reader."

The typical learning disabled child could only answer these items in one way. While it is certainly true that a child who believes negative things about himself is likely to have low self-esteem, we thought the issue important enough to test the children with another scale that more clearly measured this construct.

The scale we choose was the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (1965). This scale includes only ten items and, except for one item that could be considered subject to the criticism I mentioned, the items are ones that do ask for more general self-evaluations that indicate the child's sense of worthiness. For, example, some of the items are:

- "I feel that I have a number of good qualities."
- "At times I think I am no good at all." and
- "I take a positive attitude toward myself."

We gave the social desirability and self-esteem questionnaires to fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth graders in two middle class suburban school districts. The learning disabled children who participated had been identified as such by their schools. Initial analyses of the results indicated school district differences, and so the results were analyzed separately by school district.

The results indicated that in the first school district, there was a significant effect for Group on the social desirability measure ($F\ [1, 42] = 4.95$, $p < .05$). The learning disabled children claimed more socially perfect behaviors than did the nondisabled children (LD $\bar{x} = 11.78$; NLD $\bar{x} = 8.44$).

On the self-esteem measure, there was a significant interaction of Group and Sex, ($F\ [1,42] = 4.69$, $p < .05$). The learning disabled children did not differ from the nondisabled children of their sex. However, the learning disabled girls had significantly lower self-esteem scores than the learning disabled boys (LD girls $\bar{x} = 2.6$; LD boys $x = 1.23$: high scores = low self-esteem).

In the second school district, we found no group, grade or sex differences on either of the two measures. The children all had roughly equivalent social desirability scores, and roughly equivalent self-esteem scores.

The results we found with the social desirability scale did indicate that the learning disabled children are as desirous of "looking good" as nondisabled children. When given this easy, nonthreatening opportunity to win approval, they were at least as likely as the other children to take it. These findings suggest that when learning disabled children are found to behave differently in social situations than other children, it is unlikely that these differences arise because of a simple lack of motivation on the part of the children to behave in a socially approved way. It suggests that other factors, for example, the lack of knowledge of what to do, or the lack of ability to discriminate when particular behaviors are appropriate, are likely to be involved.

In one of the samples in this study the learning disabled girls reported lower self-esteem than learning disabled boys. This may reflect findings in some studies that learning disabled girls are even more rejected by other children than are learning disabled boys (Bryan, 1974; Hutton & Polo, 1976). Girls also tend, on the whole, to get better grades in school than do boys, so it may be that not doing well in school is especially salient and distressing to learning disabled girls.

The lack of differences between learning disabled and nondisabled children on the self-esteem scale replicates the findings of a study using the same scale by Nona Tollefson and her colleagues, that was reported in the most recent issue of the Learning Disability Quarterly (Tollefson, Tracy, Johnsen, Buenning, Farmer & Barke, 1982). Their interpretation was that the learning disabled children only looked as if they were high in self-esteem because they gave answers that were socially desirable, rather than because they were truly equivalent to nondisabled children in self-esteem. Considering the results we found on the social desirability scale, this interpretation is certainly viable, but we would like a different possibility at least to be considered. While one can't conclude that there are no differences just because they weren't found in this or the Tollefson study, it is at least conceivable that learning disabled children are able to derive enough satisfaction from areas in which their disabilities do not impose a handicap to allow them to maintain a basically positive attitude toward themselves. And also, perhaps parents and teachers are being successful in getting learning disabled children to believe that, despite their difficulties, they are still worthwhile individuals.

Finally, it is important to note that the effects that were found in this study appeared in the sample from one school district but not the other. This demonstrates the significant role that environmental factors play in the development of social motivation and self-esteem, and suggests that there is reason to be optimistic about the potential for successful interventions in these areas.

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